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# Is racism the new sectarianism? Negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland from 2004 to 2015

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## ABSTRACT

Negativity towards ethnic minorities is a serious problem in Northern Ireland. Its history of the Troubles around religious identities makes Northern Ireland a special case in Europe. This paper examines negativity towards Muslims, Eastern Europeans and immigrants in Northern Ireland using data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey and the British Social Attitudes Survey. The results from regressions show that anti-immigrant negativity is no more prevalent in Northern Ireland than elsewhere in the UK. However, levels of negativity towards Muslims and Eastern Europeans are significantly higher than in Great Britain and have increased in recent years, particularly among young adults aged 18–24 years, although older cohorts are more intolerant on average. Our regression analyses found strong positive relationships between anti-immigrant negativity, sectarianism and perceived neighbourhood segregation. Higher education, contacts with minority members and (religiously) mixed schooling are negatively related to negativity towards immigrants.


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**KEYWORDS** Prejudice; racism; sectarianism; Northern Ireland; survey data; anti-immigrant attitudes

## Introduction

Negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities is known to be a problem in Northern Ireland. Hate crimes against immigrant communities in inner-city areas of Belfast and Londonderry, such as bricks thrown through windows, racist smearing on houses and physical attacks (Kilpatrick 2014; McDonald 2014; The Irish Times 2015; Irish News 2016) have been reported

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so frequently in the press that Northern Ireland was even dubbed the “race hate capital of Europe” (Lentin and McVeigh 2006; Knox 2011). Northern Ireland’s history of sectarian conflict around national and religious identities (as either Protestant – British or Catholic Irish) makes the country a special case in Europe. Hence, much of the literature has linked Northern Ireland’s high rates of racially motivated hate crimes and the strong prevalence of negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities to the region’s sectarian past (Moore 1972; McVeigh and Rolston 2007; Knox 2011; Savaric 2014; McKee 2015; McVeigh 2015). This view has also been the predominant public discourse, e.g. the former pastor John McCreedy was recently cited in the press calling racism “the new sectarianism” (Irish News 2016).

Brewer, on the other hand, emphasized that the link between sectarianism and racism in Northern Ireland is mainly explained by a history of colonialism and deeply entrenched historical economic and political struggles on both sides of the (Protestant British vs. Catholic Irish) divide, which historically has led to a conflation of categories of sect, ethnicity and race (Brewer 1992). Following this line of reasoning, socio-economic and social structural factors may well prove to be more important predictors of racism than sectarianism. Economic and social structural factors are known predictors of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in other countries (McLaren 2003; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010), thus Northern Ireland might be less exceptional than the dominant public discourse suggests.

We therefore ask if Northern Ireland is indeed a special case, or if factors other than the regions’ sectarian past are the stronger predictors of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. Other factors that may trigger negativity towards immigrants and minorities are, e.g. growing immigrant numbers, poverty and inequality, potentially leading to increased perceptions of minorities as a threat. Like other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has experienced a rise in immigration from Eastern European countries since 2004, and has a very small, but growing community of Asian and African Muslims. Rises in anti-immigrant attitudes in recent years, especially in the wake of the 2014–15 European refugee crisis, have been reported also for the UK and other countries (Ackermann and Freitag 2015; Bohman and Hjerm 2016; Tausch 2016).

This study examines trends in negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities between 2004 and 2015, the most recent time-point for which survey data are available for Northern Ireland. Negativity is operationalized here as negative attitudes towards Eastern Europeans, Muslims and immigrants, as reported by the respondents of two nationally representative annual surveys.

The first part of the analysis consists of bivariate comparisons of aggregated negative attitudes towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, such as Muslims and Eastern Europeans between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. We then carry out a comparison of attitudes across age cohorts

within Northern Ireland. The final part of the analysis consists of binary logistic and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models using recent survey data. The focus is on individual-level predictors of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. The models will include the respondents' religious identification, whether they attended a religiously mixed versus a (Protestant or Catholic) segregated school, the (self-reported) extent of religious segregation of the neighbourhood, attitudes towards religious mixing and indicators of educational attainment and employment deprivation.

## **Negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in the literature**

The literature on out-group negativity consists of three main approaches, contact theory (Pettigrew 1998, 2008; Brown and Hewstone 2005; Hayes and Dowds 2006; Frølund Thomsen 2012), group threat/competition theory (Quillian 1995; Schneider 2007; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010; Van Assche et al. 2014) and social identity theory (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Brewer 1993; Kunovich and Hodson 1999; Coakley 2007).

Contact theory (Pettigrew 1998; Brown and Hewstone 2005; Tam et al. 2009) posits that increased contact with minority members decreases prejudice, as inter-group trust increases through repeated social interactions. According to this, an increase in the numbers of out-group members should lead to decreases in out-group negativity, as it leads to more contact opportunities. A number of studies found evidence to support this theory both at the level of individual contacts and the neighbourhood level (Schmid et al. 2014; Kaufmann and Harris 2015). A negative link between increased contact and negativity towards ethnic minorities was found in Northern Ireland (Hayes and Dowds 2006; McKee 2015), Scandinavia and other European countries (McLaren 2003; Frølund Thomsen 2012; Schmid et al. 2014).

Contrary to contact theory, the group threat/competition theory approach (Quillian 1995; Schneider 2007; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010; Van Assche et al. 2014), posits that an increase in immigrant numbers triggers out-group fears particularly among the worse-off, people in manual occupations and with low education, as incoming migrants compete for jobs in the lower paid sector. In the wake of the Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump's presidential campaign in 2016, both of which were to a large extent driven by anti-immigrant sentiment, group threat theory has gained in salience. Empirical cross-national comparisons (McLaren 2003; Schneider 2007; Borgonovi 2012; Doebler 2014, 2015) and case studies from the UK (Ford 2008; Cutts, Ford, and Goodwin 2011), the Netherlands (Coenders and Scheepers 2003; Billiet and De Witte 2008; Van Assche et al. 2014), Germany (Wagner, Christ, and Pettigrew 2008) and Northern Ireland (Hayes and Dowds 2006; McVeigh and Rolston 2007; McKee 2015) confirmed that lower

educational achievement and lower socio-economic status are associated with an increased likelihood of perceiving immigrants and ethnic minorities as a threat. Particularly in the case of Northern Ireland, group threat theory is a plausible candidate for explaining anti-immigrant negativity, since the history of sectarian hostility was theorized by several scholars as based on economic and power struggles between the two (Protestant vs. Catholic) ethnic/religious groups (Brewer 1992; Anderson and Shuttlesworth 1998; McVeigh and Rolston 2007; Brewer 2015).

Recent work by Kaufmann (2014) found that small residential areas in England and Wales which experienced a rapid increase in immigrant numbers over relatively short periods of time showed higher levels of “white flight” among the majority population than areas that experienced a slower growth in immigrant numbers (Kaufmann 2014). We cannot replicate these findings with the available Northern Irish data. The Census does not have data on immigrant numbers beyond 2011, and the surveys available for Northern Ireland do not have sufficient small-area-Geography identifiers. We do, however, have indicators of the self-reported frequency of contact with minority members. Supporters of threat-perceptions theory would expect increased contact with ethnic minorities to be associated with more negativity towards them.

The third theory framework contributing to the study of out-group negativity in Northern Ireland is social identity theory. According to this theory (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979; Seul 1999; Brewer and Pierce 2005), individuals form their social identities by distancing their own group from not accepted out-groups. Social identities are important for developing a sense of who we are (Tajfel 1974; Brewer 1993). Where social identities are based on out-group negativity, this negativity tends to be more persistent than other attitudes and is therefore harder to tackle with short-term policy measures.

Due to Northern Ireland’s history of the conflict, anxieties to preserve religious and national identities and mistrust of the religious–national “other” have been prevalent in the region (Pehrson, Gheorghiu, and Ireland 2012). The identity theory approach may help explain why sectarianism and negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities have been so tenacious in Northern Ireland (Knox 2011; Pehrson, Gheorghiu, and Ireland 2012; Jarman 2015). However, recent research found that religious identification is on the decline since the last Census and several authors observed a trend towards more relaxed attitudes towards religious and national identities (Coakley 2007; Hayes and McAllister 2009; Mitchell 2013).

This paper pursues the following research questions:

Firstly, whether negative attitudes towards immigrants and ethnic minorities are really more prevalent in Northern Ireland than in other regions of the UK, as some of the literature suggests (Knox 2011; Savaric 2014).

Secondly, how does negativity towards these groups differ across age cohorts and over time? Is negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants mostly a youth-phenomenon, as is often purported in the press? Is the younger generation in Northern Ireland less tolerant compared to older cohorts? Has the Northern Irish population become more tolerant of immigrants and ethnic minorities over time?

We address our last set of research questions using multiple regression models. Because sectarianism, negative attitudes and behaviours towards the religious “other” have been conceptually linked to intolerance towards other minorities in Northern Ireland (Moore 1972; Hayes and McAllister 2009; Knox 2011; McVeigh 2015), we aim to capture sectarian attitudes and correlate these with negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. Is sectarianism more strongly related to negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities than other variables? Is racism “the new sectarianism” (Irish News 2016)? How are religious segregation and mixing – having attended a religiously mixed versus segregated school and perceived religious segregation of the respondents’ neighbourhoods related to negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities?

## Data

The analysis is based on data from the Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys (NILT) 2004–2015 (ARK 2016) and the 2013-wave of the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA) (NatCen Social Research 2014).<sup>1</sup> The NILT is undertaken by researchers at Queen’s University Belfast and the BSA by NatCen (2014). Both datasets are publically available at the UK Data Service. The surveys are based on random probability samples, were gathered each year via face-to-face interviews of approximately 1000 respondents and are representative of the populations aged 18 and older of Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

## Methods

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, to locate Northern Ireland in the wider context of the UK, a comparison of descriptive percentages of negative attitudes towards Eastern Europeans, Muslims and immigrants is performed using the 2013-waves of the NILT and BSA. The 2013-wave is the most recent British data available on negativity towards these minorities. Great Britain consists of 13 government office regions (North East, North West, Yorkshire and Humbers, East Midlands, West Midlands, South West, Eastern, inner and outer London, South East, Wales and Scotland). The NILT data from Northern Ireland are compared to these regions and to Great Britain as a whole.

The second step is a cross-sectional time-series comparison of negative attitudes towards the above-mentioned groups from 2004 to 2015 in Northern Ireland by age cohort. This is done to gain insights into general longitudinal trends in anti-immigrant negativity and to pick up possible cohort and period effects. Thirdly, we perform a set of OLS and binary logistic regressions with negativity towards Muslims, Eastern Europeans and immigrants as the dependent variables. We are interested particularly in relationships between religious sectarianism (endorsing a sectarian attitude) and negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, i.e. whether this matters over and above the (known) effects of educational and employment deprivation.

Negativity towards ethnic minorities was operationalized via a set of survey questions that were asked in both the NILT and the BSA. The question texts vary only slightly between the two surveys for some of the items. We supplied a Table in the *Supplementary Online Appendix* (Supplementary Appendix 1 Table 1), which lists all the dependent variables of the analysis and what survey they are from.

The binary variables “would not accept an Eastern European/Muslim/member of another minority as a relative by marriage” (NILT) and “would mind a lot/a little if a close relative were to marry a person who is Eastern European/Muslim” were used as measures of negativity towards ethnic minorities. The three items “immigrant workers are bad for the [Northern Irish/British] economy” (disagreement to “are good for the economy”), “immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in [Northern Ireland/Britain]” and “Britain’s/Northern Ireland’s culture is generally undermined by immigrants” were added to an index to operationalize negativity towards immigrants.

Cronbach’s alpha for this index was 0.76, indicating an acceptable internal scale consistency.

Endorsement of a sectarian attitude was operationalized as a four-point scale computed from the following statements: “I would prefer to live in a neighbourhood with people of only my own religion”, “I would prefer a workplace with people of only my own religion” and “I would prefer a school with children of only my own religion”, Cronbach’s alpha for the scale was 0.750, indicating an acceptable internal scale consistency. The models also test, whether living in religiously segregated areas is related to negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. Because the two surveys do not contain geographical identifiers, it is not possible to measure area-segregation directly. Instead, we computed an index of subjectively experienced religious segregation of the areas the respondents live in (“do you think that leisure centres/parks/libraries/shopping centres in this area are shared and open to both Protestants and Catholics?”). The four binary items were added to a four-point scale. Cronbach’s alpha of the scale was 0.95, indicating excellent scale reliability. In addition, the models include binary variables for having had regular contact with out-group members (1 = contact at least once a

week, 0 = less than that), and whether the respondent has ever lived outside Northern Ireland for more than six months (this includes having lived in other parts of the UK or the Republic of Ireland). The latter variable was included because Northern Ireland is a unique context both regarding its high levels of religious segregation and its very low numbers of immigrants compared to other parts of the UK, Ireland and Europe. Having lived in a more diverse and less religiously segregated environment arguably enhances contact opportunities with minorities.

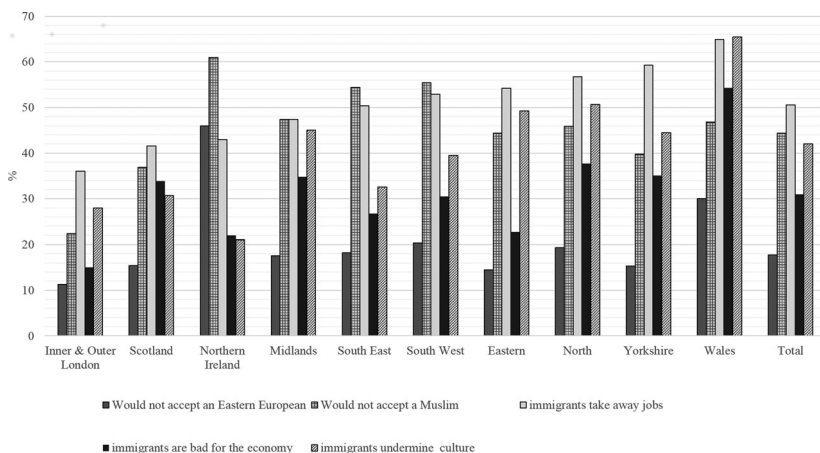
The models control for education categories (degree, A-levels, GCSE Grade D–G, GCSE Grade A–C as the reference category), unemployment (0 = not unemployed, 1 = unemployed), the respondents' religion (whether Protestant, Catholic, no religion or other), gender (1 = female, 0 = male) and age.

Supplementary Appendix 1 Table 2 in the online appendix contains the summary statistics of all variables used in the analysis.

## Findings

Our first research question was whether negative attitudes towards immigrants and ethnic minorities are more prevalent in Northern Ireland than in other regions of the UK, thus justifying to label the region the “race hate capital of the UK” (Lentin and McVeigh 2006; McVeigh and Rolston 2007; Knox 2011). To answer this, we carried out a UK-wide comparison of negative population attitudes towards immigrants, Muslims and Eastern Europeans using the NILT and BSA data.

Figure 1 demonstrates that Northern Ireland deserves this label only with regard to social distance towards particular minority groups (Eastern



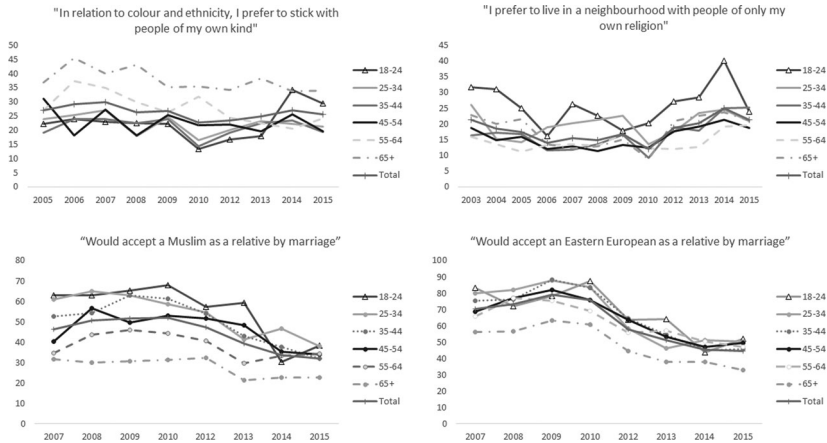
**Figure 1.** Comparison across UK regions: percentages of anti-immigrant attitudes, 2013. Data: BSA 2013 and NILT 2013.



Europeans and especially Muslims). Looking at negativity towards immigrants more generally, it is clearly Wales that stands out (65 per cent are intolerant towards immigrants), followed by the East Midlands, the North West and Yorkshire ("immigrants take away jobs"), and not Northern Ireland. All these regions showed worryingly high levels of anti-immigrant attitudes in the most recent survey data available (2013). The affected regions also have above-average levels of deprivation and job insecurity (Gill 2015). Unsurprisingly, these are also regions, where high percentages of the population voted to leave the European Union in last year's Brexit referendum (The Electoral Commission 2016). While Northern Ireland is certainly not among the most tolerant regions in the UK, it is not its "race hate capital" (Lentin and McVeigh 2006; Knox 2011). Nevertheless, the numbers of respondents in Northern Ireland who, in 2013, rejected Muslims (61 per cent) and Eastern Europeans (46 per cent) as family members are cause for concern. In addition, more recent NILT data for 2014 and 2015 showed a further increase in the percentage unwilling to accept Muslims as family members to 66 per cent in 2014 and 68 per cent in 2015. We do not have comparable UK mainland data for the period after 2013, as these questions were not asked in later rounds of the BSA, but the numbers on anti-immigrant attitudes and recent rises in racially motivated hate crimes in England in the wake of the Brexit referendum (Gietel-Basten 2016; Parveen and Sherwood 2016) make clear that rising negativity towards minorities is a UK-wide problem, not just a Northern Irish one.

The analysis now focuses on Northern Ireland. Our second set of research questions asked how negative attitudes towards Muslims, Eastern Europeans and immigrants differ over time and between age cohorts and whether Northern Ireland's population has become more tolerant towards minorities between 2004 and 2015. To observe longitudinal trends, we created line charts of social distance towards Muslims and Eastern Europeans, and a time-series of the attitude "In relation to color and ethnicity, I prefer to stick with people of my own kind" by age cohort. We also examined a sectarian attitude to assess, if the patterns overlap.

Looking at Figure 2, some clear patterns emerge: At all time-points and across different indicators of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, older cohorts are more intolerant than younger cohorts. The great exception are the 18- to 24-year-olds, who show an almost threefold increase from 13 per cent in 2010 to 34 per cent in 2014 in endorsement of the racist attitude "in relation to color and ethnicity, I prefer to stick with people of my own kind" (Figure 2, upper left) – the steepest increase of all cohorts. Interestingly, endorsement of this attitude among this cohort dropped by five per cent between 2014 and 2015, but it still remains well above average. Older cohorts also showed some increases between 2010 and 2014, but far less pronounced than the youngest cohort.



**Figure 2.** Time-series of negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities in the NILT.

Previous discussions of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities frequently mentioned sectarianism as an important explanatory variable. Therefore, a time-series of the sectarian attitude “I prefer to live in a neighborhood with people of only my own religion” was included (Figure 2, upper right). The line chart of sectarianism shows a similar pattern to the racist attitude: After declines for all cohorts between 2004 and 2009, endorsement increased between 2010 and 2014. Pearson’s  $r$  of the two attitudes is 0.370. Again, the youngest cohort of 18- to 24-year-olds showed the most pronounced increase from 18 per cent in 2009 to 40 per cent in 2014, followed by a 16 per cent decrease to 24 per cent endorsement in 2015. Interestingly, older cohorts are consistently less likely to endorse the sectarian attitude than younger cohorts.

The lower half of Figure 2 gives the time-series of social acceptance of Muslims and Eastern Europeans. As expected, we observe a strong decrease in the acceptance of Muslims as a relative by marriage since 2009 across all cohorts. This is likely a period effect. The world events of the last decade, war on terror, ISIS terrorism and frequent anti-Muslim discourses in the press have left their mark on population attitudes in Northern Ireland. However, there is a large generational gap, older cohorts are consistently and considerably more intolerant towards Muslims than younger ones. Interestingly, the youngest cohort of 18- to 24-year-olds are again the exception. They show by far the strongest decline in acceptance of Muslims (minus 30 per cent from 2013 to 2014), and by 2014 they are as intolerant towards Muslims as the 55- to 64-year-olds. As was the case with other negative out-group attitudes, the years 2014 to 2015 show an improvement for this cohort, but only by 8 per cent. In 2015, intolerance of Muslims among the youngest cohort remains well above the national average.

Looking at the acceptance of Eastern Europeans (Figure 2, lower right), we see a similar, albeit milder pattern of steady decline across all age-cohorts. The cohort difference is considerably smaller with regard to acceptance of Eastern Europeans than acceptance of Muslims and it is decreasing – the lines almost converge by 2014. This is due to the younger cohorts (aged <45) exhibiting stronger declines in acceptance of Eastern Europeans than older ones. The decline is not as steep as it was for acceptance of Muslims, but the pattern is clear. Northern Ireland's population has not become more tolerant towards immigrants and ethnic minorities, but less so.

The next step of the analysis tests for multivariate relationships between social indicators and negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants in Northern Ireland using binary logistic and OLS regressions. The research questions now focus on how sectarianism, perceived religious segregation of the respondent's neighbourhood and having attended a religiously mixed secondary school are related to negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. Are these factors that are unique to Northern Ireland stronger predictors of negativity towards minorities than other factors that are known to affect out-group negativity in other countries, such as education (Coenders and Scheepers 2003; Borogoni 2012) and employment deprivation (Strabac and Lister 2008)?

Supplementary Appendix 1 Table 3 contains the odds-ratios and confidence intervals from the regression models with social distance towards Muslims, Eastern Europeans, and "other minorities" (refusal to accept members of each group as a relative by marriage) as the dependent variables. The last two columns of Supplementary Appendix 1 Table 3 contain the beta coefficients and confidence intervals of the OLS regression. The dependent variable is our index of anti-immigrant attitudes (Table 1).

The regression models show that having a sectarian attitude ("I prefer to live in a neighbourhood with only my own religion"), area-level religious segregation (living in areas, where libraries, parks and shopping facilities are not shared between Protestants and Catholics) and low education are the strongest individual-level predictors of negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants. Having attended religiously mixed, as opposed to segregated schooling, however, is statistically significantly negatively related to anti-immigrant attitudes, but not related to negativity towards particular ethnic minorities. The findings of strong associations between segregation, sectarian attitudes and negativity towards ethnic minorities lend support to identity theory, as religious segregation and sectarianism in Northern Ireland are both linked to nationalist identity-struggles (McVeigh and Rolston 2007; Goetze-Morey et al. 2015). This finding indicates that when it comes to the impact of sectarianism on attitudes towards other minorities, Northern Ireland is indeed still a special case.

**Table 1.** Social distance and negative attitudes towards different immigrant groups, NILT 2015.

"Would object to having as a relative by marriage: ..."	Logistic regression: "Would object to having as a relative by marriage: ..."						OLS regression: negative attitudes towards immigrants	
	Eastern Europeans		Muslims		Other minorities		Anti-Immigrant Attitude Index	
	Odds-Ratios	Conf. Int.	Odds-Ratios	Conf. Int.	Odds-Ratios	Conf. Int.	Beta Coef.	Conf. Int.
Age	1.022***	1.013, 1.030	1.011*	1.002, 1.020	1.017***	1.009, 1.026	0.002	−0.001, 0.004
Sex	1.027	0.778, 1.357	1.147	0.856, 1.538	0.965	0.729, 1.277	0.051	−0.028, 0.130
Protestant	1.633**	1.206, 2.213	1.636**	1.183, 2.262	1.277	0.941, 1.732	0.274***	0.181, 0.367
No religion	2.081**	1.285, 3.368	1.209	0.733, 1.996	1.624	1.000, 2.638	0.152*	0.030, 0.273
Church attendance	1.029	0.966, 1.096	0.988	0.924, 1.058	1.046	0.982, 1.115	−0.019	−0.115, 0.076
Degree	0.656*	0.450, 0.957	0.403***	0.272, 0.596	0.610*	0.418, 0.891	−0.178**	−0.294, −0.062
A-levels	1.001	0.631, 1.587	0.729	0.448, 1.185	0.892	0.563, 1.412	0.104	−0.008, 0.215
GCSE, Grades D–G	2.156**	1.260, 3.687	1.776	0.951, 3.316	2.301**	1.339, 3.954	−0.010	−0.192, 0.172
No qualification	0.795	0.528, 1.196	1.024	0.646, 1.624	0.860	0.569, 1.299	0.197**	0.073, 0.321
Unemployed	1.078	0.663, 1.754	0.907	0.538, 1.527	1.131	0.692, 1.851	0.212*	0.001, 0.423
Urban	1.115	0.817, 1.520	1.030	0.743, 1.426	1.340	0.980, 1.831	−0.179**	−0.310, −0.049
Sectarian Attitude	2.677***	1.963, 3.649	2.566***	1.814, 3.630	2.350***	1.724, 3.202	0.228***	0.142, 0.313
Perceived area-segregation	1.861***	1.431, 2.420	1.952***	1.432, 2.660	2.144***	1.635, 2.810	0.043*	−0.078, −0.007
Has lived abroad	0.786	0.570, 1.084	1.193	0.852, 1.670	0.965	0.698, 1.335	−0.155***	−0.245, −0.065
Attended a mixed school	1.371	0.928, 2.028	1.273	0.851, 1.905	1.425	0.960, 2.115	−0.133*	−0.250, −0.016
Contact with Eastern Europeans	0.821***	0.737, 0.913						2.689, 3.093
Contact with Muslims			0.869	0.755, 1.001				
Contact with other minorities					0.696***	0.612, 0.792		
Constant	0.133***	0.053, 0.331	0.418	0.166, 1.053	0.215**	0.084, 0.555	2.891***	
−2·Log-Likelihood	−618.644		−562.397		−610.501		−815.739	
AIC	1271.289		1158.795		1255.002		1663.479	
BIC	1355.469		1242.975		1339.183		1740.423	
N	1045		1045		1045		906	

Data: NILTS 2015.

Consistent with other research and with findings on other countries (McLaren 2003; Hayes and Dowds 2006; Hewstone et al. 2006; Tam et al. 2007; Frølund Thomsen 2012; McKee 2015), we found that regular contact (at least once a week) with minorities makes individuals less likely to endorse negative attitudes towards them. The findings support contact theory (Pettigrew 1998; Brown and Hewstone 2005; Tam et al. 2009). The coefficient of contact is non-significant when negativity towards Muslims is the dependent variable, however. This is likely due to the fact that they are the smallest and most recent minority in Northern Ireland, hence the population not living in large cities will have had only few contact opportunities with this group.

Another finding was that Protestants and the non-religious are on average more negatively inclined towards ethnic minorities and immigrants than Catholics. This concurs with researchers who found negativity towards ethnic minorities to be predominantly a phenomenon of the urban male Protestant working-class (Hewstone et al. 2006; McVeigh and Rolston 2007; Tam et al. 2007; Knox 2011; McKee 2015).

There are some interesting differences in the patterns of negativity towards immigrants compared to particular ethnic minorities: Unemployment is significantly positively related only to negativity towards immigrants, but unrelated to negativity towards particular minorities. This may lend some support to economic competition/threat-perceptions theory (Quillian 1995; Schneider 2007; Schlueter and Scheepers 2010; Kaufmann 2014): it is plausible that fear of labour market competition is directed at immigrants in general more than at specific ethnic minorities because for the unemployed, any incoming immigrant group, regardless of their ethnicity, could be a potential competition for jobs.

Urban living and having attended a religiously mixed school, too, are statistically negatively related to negativity towards immigrants, but statistically unrelated to intolerance towards specific minorities. This lends some support to contact theory. We saw from Figure 2 that all immigrant groups tend to cluster in urban areas, hence majority members living in these areas have more contact opportunities. Furthermore, religiously mixed schooling brings individuals in contact with at least the main religious (Catholic or Protestant) out-group. This likely fosters acceptance of the religious-national "other", which may spill over into acceptance of other out-groups regardless of their ethnicity.

## Discussion

This paper gave a comprehensive account of the prevalence of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland over a ten-year period. The analysis addressed a number of research questions: We asked whether Northern Ireland's population does, as the media suggest, endorse more negative attitudes towards immigrants and ethnic minorities

than the populations of other parts of the UK. The answer is that it depends on what measure of out-group negativity one focuses on. Although the Northern Irish population is considerably less tolerant towards Muslims and Eastern Europeans than the populations of other parts of the UK, the picture is reversed with regard to negativity towards immigrants. Our comparison of anti-immigrant attitudes across the UK showed that Northern Ireland is by no means the only UK region with worryingly high levels of anti-immigrant negativity. In fact, Wales, the East Midlands, the North West and Yorkshire showed significantly higher levels of anti-immigrant negativity among their populations than Northern Ireland. Calling Northern Ireland the “race hate capital” of the UK, let alone Europe, would be a gross over-generalization. Nevertheless, negativity towards ethnic minorities is on the increase in Northern Ireland and the numbers are cause for concern. But our analysis also showed that negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities is a UK-wide problem, not just a Northern Irish one.

The findings are interesting with regard to contact theory. Northern Ireland is the UK region with the smallest number of immigrants, especially Muslims and Eastern Europeans. Its Muslim population is tiny and highly clustered in inner-city areas, and although Eastern Europeans are the largest minority, their share among the population is nowhere near that in other parts of the UK. Yet, Northern Ireland is the region with the highest levels of negativity towards these particular groups. Our findings from regression models showed that regular contact with Eastern Europeans and other minorities is linked to more tolerance towards them. This is mirrored by other findings in the literature (Hayes and Dowds 2006; McKee 2015).

Another finding which indirectly supports contact theory (McLaren 2003; Hayes and Dowds 2006; Hewstone et al. 2006; Frølund Thomsen 2012) is that having attended a religiously mixed (as opposed to segregated) secondary school is statistically negatively related to negativity towards immigrants. Thus, enhanced contact with the religious “other” in school makes people more likely to be tolerant of the religious “other” and towards other out-groups. The fact that mixed schooling is statistically unrelated to negativity towards Eastern Europeans and Muslims may be explained by the limited contact opportunities with these groups, due to their small numbers. Furthermore, the analysis found that the less segregated the respondents perceive their neighbourhood to be, the less likely are they to endorse negative attitudes towards ethnic minorities and immigrants. The finding makes sense, as immigrants tend to settle in less segregated neighbourhoods, which therefore offer more contact opportunities.

Regarding the relationship between sectarianism and negativity, we found that the sectarian attitude is strongly linked to negativity towards all ethnic minorities and immigrants, but its effect does not confound the effect of education, or other variables. Sectarianism is as strong a predictor of negativity

towards ethnic minorities as a lack of education. It is, however, misleading to call negativity towards ethnic minorities the new sectarianism. The two sets of attitudes are strongly correlated, and, as the time-series (Figure 2) showed, they follow a similar longitudinal pattern of cohort change, but racism has not replaced sectarianism. Assumptions from identity theory and accounts of the specific cultural history of competing sectarian, and (racialized) ethnic identities in Northern Ireland (Brewer 1992; Savaric 2014; Brewer 2015) can help explain the strong association between sectarian attitudes and negativity towards ethnic minorities that we found. According to identity theory, (nationalistic, ethnic or sectarian) collective identities are built and maintained through distinction from not accepted out-groups (Tajfel 1974). It is very plausible that sectarianism in Northern Ireland, with its strong emphasis on nationalistic/ethnic/religious identity-struggles and out-group rejection spills over into rejecting other out-groups as well. Brewer found this to be historically the case (Brewer 1992).

Sectarian attitudes, perceived religious segregation and low education are the strongest predictors of negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants in Northern Ireland, followed by a lack of contact with out-group members. Unemployment is positively related only to negativity towards immigrants, which makes sense, given that for the unemployed, any incoming immigrant, regardless of their ethnicity, could be perceived as an economic threat and a competitor for jobs.

Our analysis of cohort differences over time revealed some worrying findings regarding the youngest cohort of 18- to 24-year-olds: Not only did negativity towards ethnic minorities increase between 2010 and 2014 across all cohorts, we also observed particularly strong increases among the youngest cohort. We do not know what causes this cohort effect. One explanation may be an increase in anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant discourses in the press in recent years, to which the youngest cohort responded more strongly than older cohorts. There is also the possibility of an age effect: the youngest cohort is at an age where its members just enter the labour market – in a climate of generally rising negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants, they are the cohort with the strongest reason to fear labour market competition, as threat/competition theory predicts. However, these explanations must remain speculative. Future studies will assess, whether the pattern persists. The fact that at least racial prejudice (“in relation to colour and ethnicity, I prefer to stick with my own kind”) has declined from 2014 to 2015 is a somewhat hopeful sign.

## Conclusions

Negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants is a serious problem in Northern Ireland and it has increased in recent years, especially among the

young. In the wider context of rising hostility and hate incidents against immigrants not just in Northern Ireland, but across the whole UK in the wake of the Brexit referendum, there is an urgent need for policies tackling the issue. Policymakers can address negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants by employing measures that curtail religious and ethnic segregation and by creating more contact opportunities with minorities. Since sectarianism and negativity towards ethnic minorities are strongly correlated, policies that tackle sectarianism will likely also help tackle negativity towards ethnic minorities and immigrants. Such policies should target all age groups, but especially young adults. Policymakers should support and fund (new and existing) civil sector organizations in creating shared open spaces and facilitate communication across communities. Our results also indicate that furthering religiously mixed education and widening access to education among the socio-economically deprived are promising measures to tackle out-group negativity in Northern Ireland. Our findings have important policy implications beyond Northern Ireland, as educational and employment deprivation and a lack of contact opportunities with minorities have been found to be strong predictors of negativity towards immigrants and ethnic minorities not just in Northern Ireland, but across the UK and Europe.

## Note

1. BSA data on anti-immigrant attitudes and social distance to Eastern Europeans and Muslims were available for 2013, but not for 2014 and 2015.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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